

The 'progressive alliance' idea is no longer a meaningful basis for a Labour-LibDem rapprochement, but there is much common ground that remains between the two parties

Michael Kenny argues that, despite how surprising it may sound, there is a lot of areas of agreement between the Liberal Democrats and Labour that would allow for a coalition between the two parties were the situation to arise in the future.



Given the flurry of speculation about whether the current coalition might be followed in time by another made up of today's increasingly embittered rivals, the Lib Dem and Labour parties, you could be forgiven for thinking that the next General Election was due to take place in 2013, not 2015. It is far too early to assume or plan for any such scenario, less than half way through the life of the current government, when so many uncertainties lie ahead – not least the unfolding impact of the Eurozone crisis and the wavering fortunes of the British economy.

And yet, while assumptions about the results of the next election are for the birds until late 2014, there is a case for both of these parties giving more serious thought to the political and intellectual questions which the prospect of a new phase of Lib-Labbery poses.



A key development in Labour's thinking since the election has been to seek to relocate the party's soul by reconnecting with traditions of patriotic and communitarian thinking, which are sometimes presented as incompatible with liberalism. But there is a danger that such dualistic thinking blinds Labour to the [importance of the liberal sentiments](#) that still pulse within our culture, and which are especially important to younger voters.

More generally, turning away from the family of liberal thinking would mean giving up a good part of Labour's intellectual DNA. Consider the influence upon social democratic politics of the thinkers and thinking associated with this broadest of churches – Keynes, Rawls, Berlin, and Sen, for a start.

For a long time, thinking about Labour's relationship with liberalism was shaped by the influential thesis of the 'progressive alliance' – the contention that the parting of these two parties, and the traditions they represent, allowed the Conservatives to dominate the politics of the twentieth century.

But this vision is no longer a meaningful basis for a Lab-Lib rapprochement. This is, first, because the skein of overlapping values associated with early twentieth century politics – reform of Britain's political institutions, support for a paternalist welfare state, a belief in the virtue of the mixed economy and support for a liberal political and economic international order – does not now represent a sufficiently attractive or defined ideological space for either party. Second, Labour cannot put all of its ideological eggs in the liberal basket if it is to reconnect as well with those working-class voters who turned to the Tories, or did not vote at all, in the last election. Finding a coherent way of blending its liberal and communitarian instincts is a vital task for the current leadership. And, third, the Lib Dems have themselves altered significantly in the last decade, with a new cohort of MPs whose political thinking was formed in opposition to New Labour's statism, and a membership that remains socially liberal but wary of both its political rivals.

But without the prospect of returning to a familiar and shared ideological space, it may well be that any future coalition would be a matter of convenience only, a hard slog of continual trade-offs and tantrums, doomed to end in tears. And yet, one important political lesson from the last two years is that without a fairly broad-ranging sense of shared purpose, it is hard to sustain the momentum and sense of direction that an effective government requires.

The current coalition was forged around the fateful decision to sign up to the Conservatives' deficit reduction programme. And while this concrete commitment helped provide an initial sense of common purpose, its totemic status has over time come to be a major hindrance in both policy and political terms, and left too many other areas of policy to be determined by the Conservatives, leaving their junior partner in a never-ending fight for concessions and compromises. For the Lib Dems, this has created the real problem of finding a coherent story to tell a sceptical electorate about what the Party is for, a situation they will surely want to avoid again if they can.

For Labour too, a coalition forged in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and enmity is unlikely to elicit much goodwill at what is likely to be a moment of considerable economic, as well as political, pressure. Many of its potential voters and supporters may well loathe the Lib Dems, but they will also not forgive the party if it passes up the opportunity of ensuring that the Conservatives are removed from power.

So the question that more far-sighted strategists in both parties should be considering at this juncture is whether there could be more to such a coalition than a miserable and unsuccessful marriage. Without the mooring associated with the progressive alliance idea, are there principles on which these parties might find some sense of common cause?

Surprising as this may sound, it is far from difficult to locate a number of areas where, even now, Lab and Lib look like a much more plausible fit than Tory and Lib Dem. These include:

- The commitment to breaking up the powers and privileges of the elites that control economic and political life, including a shift towards progressive taxes on wealth and property, the reform of party funding and lobbying, a serious programme of decentralisation within England, and a new route map for the development of a more federal United Kingdom.
- A macro-economic strategy forged around realistic targets for fiscal consolidation, a wide-ranging industrial and innovation policy framework, an enhanced programme of investment in housing and infrastructure, and a broader commitment to reforming the 'British model' of capitalism, in key areas such as corporate governance.
- Blending the Lib Dem social mobility agenda with the regulatory approach favoured by Ed Miliband, including raising the minimum wage, ensuring worker representation on company boards, and providing a significant boost in public investment in early years provision and high-quality childcare in particular.

There are other areas too where agreement would not be hard to locate, notably on Europe and the environment. And, very obviously, there would be major points of difference and disagreement. The logic of the current political situation is bound to exacerbate tensions between the parties. This is both because of the Lib Dem involvement in the current administration and also since the coming electoral campaign will see a bitter struggle over the votes of Lib Dem supporters unhappy with the experience of coalition.

Yet, as the momentous election of 2015 begins to come over the horizon, both parties would be advised to consider if there might be positives associated with a future coalition arrangement. There are, for instance, those who think that a re-acquaintance with such liberal values as anti-paternalism and decentralisation would do Labour a power of good. And there are those in Lib Dem circles who, even if they are not avowed social democrats, are coming to realise that pursuing such goals as tackling vested interests in the economy, undertaking the institutional reforms which social mobility requires, and supporting liberal causes such as gay marriage, would be a lot easier in tandem with the Reds than the Blues.

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About the author

Michael Kenny is a Professor of Politics at Queen Mary, University of London and a Research Associate at the IPPR. He is writing here in a personal capacity.

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